

THERE IS NO DEFENSE

by Theodore Sturgeon

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CURSING formality, Belter loosened his tunic and slouched back in his chair. He gazed at each of the members of the Joint Solar Military Council in turn, and rasped: "You might as well be comfortable, because, so help me, if I have to chain you to this table from now until the sun freezes, I'll ran off this record over and over again until someone figures an angle. I never heard of anything yet, besides The Death, that couldn't be whipped one way or another. There's a weakness somewhere in this thing. It's got to be on the record. So we'll just keep at the record until we find it. Keep your eyes peeled and the hair out of your eyes. That goes for you too, Leess."

The bottled Jovian shrugged hugely. The infrared sensory organ on its cephalothorax flushed as Belter's words crackled through the translator. Glowering at the creature, Belter quenched a flash of sympathy. The Jovian was a prisoner in other things besides the bottle which supplied its atmosphere and gravity. Leess represented a disgraced and defeated race, and its position at the conference table was a hollow honor—a courtesy backed by heat and steel and The Death. But Belter's glower did not change. There was no time, now, to sympathize with those whose fortunes of war were all bad ones.

Belter turned to the orderly and nodded. A sigh, compounded of worry and weariness, escaped the council as one man. The lights dimmed, and again the record appeared on the only flat wall of the vast chamber.

First the astronomical data from the Plutonian Dome, showing the first traces of the Invader approaching from the direction of the Lyran

Ring— Equations, calculations, a sketch, photographs. These were dated three years back, during the closing phases of the Jovian War. The Plutonian Dome was not serviced at the time, due to the emergency. It was a completely automatic observatory, and its information was not needed during the interplanetary trouble. Therefore it was not equipped with instantaneous transmissions, but neatly reeled up its information until it could be visited after the war. There was a perfectly good military observation base on Outpost, the retrograde moon of Neptune, which was regarded as quite adequate to watch the Solar System area. That is, there *had* been a base there—

But, of course, the Invader was well into the System before anyone saw the Pluto records, and by that time—

The wall scene faded into the transcript of the instantaneous message received by Terran HQ, which was rigged to accept any alarm from all of the watch posts.

The transcript showed the interior of the Neptunian military observatory, and cut in apparently just before the Sigmen heard the alarm. One was sprawled in a chair in front of the finder controls; the other, a rangy lieutenant with the burned skin of his Martian Colonial stock, stiffened, looked up at the blinking “General Alarm” light as the muted, insistent note of the “Stations” bell began to thrum from the screen. The sound transmission was very good; the councilmen could distinctly hear the lieutenant’s sharp intake of breath, and his voice was quite clear as he rapped:

“Colin! Alarm. Fix!”

“Fix, sir,” said the enlisted man, his fingers flying over the segmented controls. “It’s deep space, sir,” he reported as he worked. “A Jovian, maybe—flanking us.”

“I don’t think so. If what’s left of their navy could make any long passes at all, you can bet it would be at Earth. How big is it?”

“I haven’t got ... oh, here it is, sir,” said the e.m. “An object about the size of a Class III-A Heavy.”

“Ship?”

“Don’t know, sir. No heat radiation from any kind of jets. And the magnetoscope is zero.”

“Get a chaser on him.”

Belter's hands tightened on the table edge. Every time he saw this part of the record he wanted to get up and yell, "*No, you idiot! It'll walk down your beam!*" The chaserscope would follow anything it was trained on, and bring in a magnified image. But it took a mess of traceable vhf to do it.

Relaxing was a conscious effort. *Must be slipping*, he thought glumly, *wanting to yell at those guys. Those guys are dead.*

In the picture recording, a projection of the chaserscope's screen was flashed on the observatory screen. Staring fearfully at this shadow picture of a shadow picture, the council saw again the familiar terrible lines of the Invader—squat, unlovely, obviously not designed for atmospheric work; slab-sided, smug behind what must have been foolproof meteor screens, for the ship boldly presented flat side and bottom plates to anything which might be thrown at her.

"It's a ship, sir!" said the e.m. unnecessarily. "Seems to be turning on its short axis. Still no drive emanations."

"Range!" said the lieutenant into a wall mike. Three lights over it winked on, indicating the batteries were manned and ready for ranging information. The lieutenant, his eyes fixed on the large indicators over the enlisted man's head, hesitated a moment, then said "Automatics! Throw your ranging gear to our chaser."

The three lights blinked, once each. The battery reporters lit up, showing automatic control as the medium and heavy launching tubes bore round to the stranger.

The ship was still on the screen, turning slowly. Now a dark patch on her flank could be seen—an open port. There was a puff of escaping gas, and *something* appeared whirling briefly away from the ship, toward the scanner. They almost saw it clearly—and then it was gone.

"They threw something at us, sir!"

"Track it!"

"Can't sir!"

"You saw the beginning of that trajectory! It was coming this way."

"Yes sir. But the radar doesn't register it. I don't see it on the

screen either. Maybe it's a warper?"

"Warpers are all theory, Colin. You don't bend radar impulses around an object and then restore them to their original direction. If this thing is warping at all, it's warping light. It—"

And then all but the Jovian closed their eyes as the screen repeated that horror—the bursting inward of the observatory's bulkhead, the great jagged blade of metal that flicked the lieutenant's head straight into the transmission camera.

The scene faded, and the lights went up.

"Slap in the next re— Hold it!" Belter said. "What's the matter with Hereford?"

The Peace delegate was slumped in his chair, his head on his arms, his arms on the table. The Martian Colonial representative touched him, and Hereford raised his seamed, saintly face:

"Sorry."

"You sick?"

Hereford sat back tiredly. "Sick?" he repeated vaguely. He was not a young man. Next to that of the Jovian, his position was the strangest of all. He represented a group, as did each of the others. But not a planetary group. He represented the amalgamation of all organized pacifistic thought in the System. His chair on the Joint Solar Military Council was a compromise measure, the tentative answer to an apparently unanswerable question—can a people do without the military? Many thought people could. Some thought not. To avoid extremism either way, the head of an unprecedented amalgamation of peace organizations was given a chair on the JSMC. He had the same vote as a planetary representative. "Sick?" he repeated in a whispering baritone. "Yes, I rather think so." He waved a hand at the blank wall. "Why did the Invader do it? So pointless ... so ... so stupid." He raised puzzled eyes, and Belter felt a new kind of sympathy. Hereford's hollow-ground intelligence was famous in four worlds. He was crackling, decisive; but now he could only ask the simplest of questions, like a child too tired to be badly frightened.

"Yeah-why?" asked Belter. "Oh ... never mind the rest of the record," he added suddenly. "I don't know how the rest of you feel, but at the moment I'm hypnotized by the jet-blasted thing.

“Why, Hereford wants to know. If we knew that, maybe we could plan something. Defenses, anyway.”

Somebody murmured: “It’s not a campaign. It’s murder.”

“That’s it. The Invader reaches out with some sort of a short-range disrupting bomb and wipes out the base on Outpost. Then it wanders into the System, washes out an uninhabited asteroid beacon, drifts down through the shield screening of Titan and kills off half the population with a cyanogen synthesizing catalyst. It captures three different scanner-scouts, holding them with some sort of a tractor beam, whirling them around like a stone on a string, and letting them go straight at the nearest planet. Earth ships, Martian, Jovian—doesn’t matter. It can outfly and outfight anything we have so far, except—”

“Except The Death,” whispered Hereford. “Go on, Belter. I knew it was coming to this.”

“Well, it’s true! And then the cities. If it ever drops a disrupter like that”—he waved at the wall, indicating the portion of the record they had just seen—“on a large city, there wouldn’t be any point in even looking for it, let alone rebuilding it. We can’t communicate with the Invader—if we send out a general signal it ignores us, and if we send out a beam it charges us or sends one of those warping disrupter bombs. We can’t even surrender to it! It just wanders through the System, changing course and speed from moment to moment, and every once in a while taking a crack at something.”

The Martian member glanced at Hereford, and then away. “I don’t see why we’ve waited so long. I saw Titan, Belter. In another century it’ll be dead as Luna.” He shook his head. “No pre-Peace agreement can stand in the way of the defense of the System no matter how solemn the agreement was. I voted to outlaw The Death, too. I don’t like the idea of it any more than ... than Hereford there. But circumstances alter cases. Are we going to sacrifice everything the race has built just for an outdated principle? Are we going to sit smugly behind an idealistic scrap of paper while some secret weapon chops us down bit by bit?”

“Scrap of paper,” said Hereford. “Son, have you read your ancient history?”

The translator hissed. Through it, Leess spoke. The flat, unaccented words were the barest framework for the anger which those who knew Jovians could detect by the sudden paling of the

creature's sensory organ. "Leess object phrase secret weapon. Man from Mars suggest Invader Jovian work."

"Cool down, Leess," Belter said, reaching over and firmly putting the Martian back in his seat. "Hey you—watch your language or you'll go back to the canals to blow the rust off supersoy. Now, Leess; I rather think the delegate from Mars let his emotions get the better of him. No one thinks that the Invader is Jovian. It's from deep space somewhere. It has a drive far superior to anything we've got, and the armament ... well, if Jupiter had anything like that, you wouldn't have lost the war. And then there was Titan. I don't think Jovians would kill off so many of their own just to camouflage a new secret weapon."

The Martian's eyebrows lifted a trifle. Belter frowned, and the Martian's face went forcibly blank. The Jovian relaxed.

Addressing the Council generally, but looking at the Martian, Belter gritted: "The war is over. We're all Solarians, and the Invader is a menace to our System. After we get rid of the Invader we'll have time to tangle with each other. Not before. Is that clear?"

"No human trust Jupiter. No man trust Leess," sulked the Jovian. "Leess no think. Leess no help. Jupiter better off dead than not trusted."

Belter threw up his hands in disgust. The sensitivity and stubbornness of the Jovian were well known. "If there's a clumsy, flat-footed way of doing things, a Martian'll find it," he growled. "Here we need every convolution of every brain here. The Jovian has a way of thinking different enough so he might help us crack this thing, and you have to go and run him out on strike."

The Martian bit his lips. Belter turned to the Jovian. "Leess, please—come off your high horse. Maybe the Solar System is a little crowded these days, but we all have to live in it. Are you going to cooperate?"

"No. Martian man no trust Jupiter. Mars die, Jupiter die, Earth die. Good. Nobody not trust Jupiter." The creature creased inward upon itself a movement as indicative as the thrusting out of a lower lip.

"Leess is in this with the rest of us," said the Martian. "We ought to—"

“That’ll do!” barked Belter. “You’ve said enough chum. Concentrate on the Invader and leave Leess alone. He has a vote on this council and by the same token, he has the right to refrain from voting.”

“Whose side are you on?” flashed the Martian, rising.

Belter came up with him, but Hereford’s soft, deep voice came between them like a barrier. The Peace delegate said: “He’s on the side of the System. All of us must be. We have no choice. You Martians are fighting men. Do you think you can separate yourselves from the rest of us and stop the Invader?”

Flushed, the Martian opened his mouth, closed it again, sat down. Hereford looked at Belter, and he sat down, too. The tension in the chamber lessened, but the matter obviously relegated itself to the “For Further Action” files in at least two men’s minds.

Belter gazed at his fingers until they would be still without effort, and then said quietly: “Well, gentlemen, we’ve tried everything. There is no defense. We’ve lost ships, and men, and bases. We will lose more. If the Invader can be destroyed, we can be sure of a little time, at least, for preparation.”

“Preparation?” asked Hereford.

“Certainly! You don’t think for a minute that that ship isn’t, or won’t soon be, in communication with its own kind? Suppose we can’t destroy it. It will be able to go back where it came from, with the news that there’s a culture here for the taking, with no weapon powerful enough to touch them. You can’t be so naive as to believe that this one ship is the only one they have, or the only one we’ll ever see! Our only course is to wipe out this ship and then prepare for a full-scale invasion. If it doesn’t come before we’re prepared, our only safe course will be to carry the invasion to them, wherever they may be!”

Hereford shook his head sadly. “The old story.”

Belter’s fist came down with a crash. “Hereford. I *know* that Peace Amalgamated is a great cultural stride forward. I *know* that to de-condition the public on three planets and a hundred colonies from the peaceful way of life is a destructive move. But—can you suggest a way of keeping the peaceful way and saving our System? Can you?”

“Yes ... if ... if the Invaders can be persuaded to follow the

peaceful way.”

“When they won’t communicate? When they commit warlike acts for nothing—without plan, without conquest, apparently for the sheer joy of destruction? Hereford—we’re not dealing with anything Solarian. This is some life-form that is so different in its aims and its logic that the only thing we can do is reciprocate. Fire with fire! You talk of your ancient history. Wasn’t fascism conquered when the democratic nations went all but fascist to fight them?”

“No,” said Hereford firmly. “The fruits of fascism were conquered. Fascism itself was conquered only by democracy.”

Belter shook his head in puzzlement. “That’s irrelevant. I ... think,” he added, because he was an honest man. “To get back to the Invader: we have a weapon with which we can destroy him. We can’t use it now because of Peace Amalgamated; because the Solarian peoples have determined to outlaw it forever. The law is specific: The Death is not to be used for any purposes, under any circumstances. We, the military, can say we want it until our arteries harden, but our chances of getting it are negligible unless we have public support in repealing the law. The Invader has been with us for eighteen months or more, and in spite of his depredations, there is still no sign that the public would support repeal. Why?” He stabbed out a stumpy forefinger. “Because they follow *you*, Hereford. They have completely absorbed your quasi-religious attitude of ... what was your phrase?”

“‘Moral Essay.’”

“Yeah—Moral Essay. The test of cultural stamina. The will power to stand up for a principle in spite of emergencies, in spite of drastic changes in circumstances. A good line, Hereford, but unless you retract it, the public won’t. We could bulldoze ‘em into it, maybe; and maybe we’d have a revolution on our hands, get a lot of people killed, and wind up with a bunch of dewy-eyed idealists coming out on top, ready to defend the principles of peace with guns if they have to draft every able-bodied Solarian in the System. Meanwhile, the Invader—and perhaps, by that time, his pals—will continue to circulate around, taking a crack at any target he happens to admire. Already the crackpots are beginning to yell about the Invader being sent to test their love of peace, and calling this the second year of the Moral Essay.”

“He won’t back down,” said the Martian suddenly. “Why should he? The way he is, he’s set for life.”

“You have a lousy way of putting things!” snapped Belter, wondering *How much does personal power mean to the old saint?*

“Why this pressure?” asked Hereford gently. “You, Belter, with your martial rationalizing, and our Martian colleague here, with his personal insults—why not put it to a vote?”

Belter studied him. Was there a chance that the old man would accept the wishes of the majority here? The majority opinion of the Council was not necessarily the majority opinion of the System. And besides—how many of the Council would go along with Hereford if he chose to vote against it?

He took a deep breath. “We’ve got to know where we stand,” he said. “Informally, now—shall we use The Death on the Invader? Let’s have a show of hands.”

There was a shuffling of feet. All the men looked at Hereford, who sat still with his eyes downcast. The Martian raised his hand defiantly. The Phoebe-Titan Colonial delegate followed suit. Earth. The Belt. Five, six—eight. Nine.

“Nine,” said Belter. He looked at the Jovian, who looked back, unblinking. Not voting. Hereford’s hands were on the table.

“That’s three-quarters,” Belter said.

“Not enough,” answered Hereford. “The law stipulates *over* three-quarters.”

“You know what my vote is.”

“Sorry, Belter. You can’t vote. As chairman, you are powerless unless all members vote, and then all you can do is establish a tie so that the matter can be referred for further discussion. The regulations purposely keep a deciding vote out of the Chair, and with the membership. I ... frankly, Belter, I can’t be expected to go further than this. I have refrained from voting. I have kept you from voting. If that keeps The Death from being used—”

Belter’s knuckles cracked. He thought of the horror at Outpost, and the choking death on Titan, and what had happened to their asteroid. It and its abandoned mine workings had flared up like a baby nova, and what was left wouldn’t dirty a handkerchief. It was a fine thing for every Solarian that at long last a terrible instrument of war had been outlawed, this time by the unquestionable wish of the

people. It would be a bad thing for civilization if an exception should be made to this great rule. It was conceivable that, once the precedent was established, the long-run effects on civilization would be worse than anything the Invader could do. And yet—all his life Belter had operated under a philosophy which dictated action. Do something. It may be wrong, but—do something.

“May I speak with you alone?” he asked Hereford.

“If it is a matter which concerns the Council—”

“It concerns you only. A matter of ideology.”

Hereford inclined his head and rose. “This won’t take long,” said Belter over his shoulder, as he let the peace delegate precede him into an antechamber.

“Beat it, Jerry,” he said to the guard. The man saluted and left.

Belter leaned back against a desk, folded his arms and said: “Hereford, I’m going to tear this thing right down to essentials. If I don’t, we can spend the rest of our lives in arguing about social necessities and cultural evolution and the laws of probability as applied to the intentions of the Invader. I am going to ask you some questions. Simple ones. Please try to keep the answers simple.”

“You know I prefer that.”

“You do. All right—the whole basis of the Peace movement is to prevent fighting, on the grounds that there is always a better way. Right?”

“That is right.”

“And the Peace movement recognizes no need for violence in any form, and no conceivable exception to that idea.”

“That is right.”

“Hereford—pay close attention. You and I are in here because of the Invader, and because of the refusal of Peace Amalgamated to allow the use of the only known counter-measure.”

“Obviously.”

“Good. Just one more thing, I hold you in higher regard than any other man I know. And the same goes for the work you have done. Do

you believe that?"

Hereford smiled slowly and nodded. "I believe it."

"Well, it's true," said Belter, and with all his strength brought his open hand across Hereford's mouth.

The older man staggered back and stood, his fingers straying up to his face. In his eyes was utter disbelief as he stared at Belter, who stood again with his arms folded, his face impassive. The disbelief was slowly clouded over by puzzlement, and then hurt began to show. "Why—"

But before he could say another word, Belter was on him again. He crossed to Hereford's chest, and when the Peace delegate's hands came down, he struck him twice more on the mouth. Hereford made an inarticulate sound and covered his face. Belter hit him in the stomach.

Hereford moaned, turned, and made for the door. Belter dove, tackled him. They slid into a thrashing heap on the soft carpeting. Belter rolled clear, pulled the other to his feet and hit him again. Hereford shook his head and began to sink down, his arms over his head. Belter lifted him again, waited for just the right opening, and his hand flashed through for still another stinging slap across the mouth. Hereford grunted, and before Belter quite knew what was happening, he came up with one great blasting right that landed half on Belter's dropped chin, half on his collar bone. Belter came up off the floor in a cloud of sparks and fell heavily six feet away. He looked up to see Hereford standing over him, big fists bunched.

"Get up," said the Peace delegate hoarsely. Belter lay back, put his hands under his head, spat out some blood, and began to laugh. "*Get up!*"

Belter rolled over and got slowly to his feet. "It's all over, Hereford. No more rough stuff, I promise you."

Hereford backed off, his face working. "Did you think," he spat, "that you could resort to such childish, insane measures to force me into condoning murder?"

"Yup," said Belter.

"You're mad," said Hereford, and went to the door. "*Stop!*"

There was a note of complete command in Belter's voice. It was that note, and the man behind it which had put Belter where he was. Equally startling was the softness of his voice as he said: "Please come here, Hereford. It isn't like you to leave a thing half understood."

If he had said "Half finished," he would have lost the play. Hereford came slowly back, saying ruefully: "I know you, Belter. I know there's a reason for this. But it better be good."

Belter stood where he had been, leaning against the desk, and he folded his arms. "Hereford," he said, "one more simple question. The Peace movement recognizes no need for violence in any form, and no conceivable exception to that idea." It sounded like a recording of the same words, said a few minutes before, except for his carefully controlled breathing.

Hereford touched his bruised mouth. "Yes."

"Then," Belter grinned, "why did you hit me?"

"Why? Why did you hit *me*?"

"I didn't ask you that. Please keep it simple. Why did you hit me?"

"It was ... I don't know. It happened. It was the only way to make you stop,"

Belter grinned. Hereford stumbled on. "I see what you're doing. You're trying to make some parallel between the Invader and your attack on me. But you attacked me unexpectedly, apparently without reason—" Belter grinned more widely.

Hereford was frankly floundering now. "But I ... I had to strike you, or I... I—"

"Hereford," said Belter gently, "shall we go back now, and vote before that eye of yours blackens?"

The three Death ships, each with its cover of destroyer escorts, slipped into the Asteroid Belt. *Delta*, the keying unit, was flanked on each side by the opposed twins *Epsilon* and *Sigma*, which maintained a rough thousand-mile separation from the key. Behind them, on Earth, they had left a froth of controversy. Editorial comment on the air and in

print, both on facsimile and the distributed press, was pulling and hauling on the age-old question of the actions of duly elected administrators. We are the people. We choose these men to represent us. What must we do when their actions run contrary to our interest?

And—do they run contrary? How much change can there be in a man's attitude, and in the man himself, between the time he is elected and the time he votes on a vital measure? Can we hark back to our original Judgment of the man and trust his action as we trusted him at election time?

And again—the old bugaboo of security. When a legislative body makes a decision on a military matter, there must be news restrictions. The Death was the supreme weapon. Despite the will of the majority, there were still those who wanted it for their own purposes; people who felt it had not been used enough in the war; others who felt it should be kept assembled and ready, as the teeth in a dictatorial peace. As of old, the mass of the people had to curb its speech and sometimes its thought, to protect itself against the megalomaniac minorities.

But there was one man who suffered. Elsewhere was anger and intellectual discourse, ethical delvings and even fear. But in one man, supremely, existed the struggle between ethics and expediency. Hereford alone had the power to undo his own work. His following would believe and accept when he asked them to make this exception. Having made it, they would follow no more, and there was no place for him on Earth.

His speech had been simple, delivered without a single flickering of his torture on the fine old face. Once the thing was done, he left Earth in a way foreign to everything he had ever believed, or spoken, or recommended. He, the leader of Peace Amalgamated, who regarded with insistent disfavor the very existence of weapons, left Earth with Belter, and shared the officer's quarters of a warship. Not only was it a warship, but it was the keying unit *Delta*, under the command of "Butcher" Osgood, trigger man of The Death.

For months they tracked the Invader, using their own instruments and information relayed to them by various outposts. Under no circumstances did they use tracers. One observation post and seven warships had been crushed because of that. The Invader's reaction to a tight beam was instant and terrible. Therefore, they were limited to light reflection—what there was of it, even from the bold, bright flanks of the marauder—and the detection of the four types of drive

radiations used the ship at different accelerations.

The body of descriptive matter on the Invader increased, and there were certain irrefutable conclusions. The crew of the Invader were colloidal life, like all known life, and would be subject to The Death. This was deduced by the fact that the ship was enclosed, pressurized and contained an atmosphere of some sort, which precluded the theoretically suggested “energy” and “crystalline” life-forms. The random nature of the enemy’s vicious and casual attacks caused more controversy than almost any other factor; but as time went on, it became obvious that what the ship was doing was calling forth any attack of which the System might be capable. It had been bombed, rayed, and attempts had been made to ram. It was impervious. How long would it stay? When would its commanders conclude that they had seen the worst, and laughing go back into the depths to bring reinforcements? And was there anything—anything at all—besides The Death that could reach the Invader, or stop him, or destroy him, or even let him know fear?

Right up until D-day—Death-day—the billions who had followed Hereford hoped that some alternative could be found, so that at least their earlier resolutions would be followed in letter if not in spirit. Many of them worked like slaves to this end, and that was the greatest anomaly of all, for all the forces of Peace were engaged in devising deadly methods and engines for use as alternative to The Death. They failed. Of course they failed.

There came a day when they had to strike. The Invader had all but vanished into the celestial north, only to come hurtling back in a great curve which would pass through the plane of the ecliptic just beyond the orbit of Jupiter. The Invader’s trajectory was predictable despite his almost unbelievable maneuverability—even for him there were limits of checking and turning, which was another fact indicating colloidal life. There was no way of knowing whether he was coming back to harass the planets, or whether he was making one last observation before swinging through the System and away from Sol, back to the unknown hell which had spawned him. But whether it was attack or withdrawal, he had to be smashed. There might never be another chance.

The three Death ships moved out from the Belt, where they had lain quiet amongst the other masses floating in that great ring of detritus. Still keeping their formation, they blasted away with a crushing acceleration, their crews dopey with *momentomine*. Their courses were set to intersect that of the Invader, or close enough to

bring them well within range of The Death—twelve to twenty thousand miles. Delicate, beamless scanners checked the enemy's course moment by moment, making automatic corrections and maintaining the formation of the three ships.

Delta was Earth-manned, *Epsilon* a Martian ship, and *Sigma* belonged to the Colonials. Originally, the plan had been to scatter Colonials through the three ships, and use a Jovian craft. But Leess, as the Jovian representative, had vetoed any Jovian participation, an action which had brought about a violent reawakening of antipathies toward the major planet. Public feeling was so loaded against the use of The Death that the responsibility must be shared. Jupiter's stubborn and suicidal refusal to share it was inflexible; the Jovian solidarity was as thorough as ever.

Four days out, the master controls dropped the acceleration to 1 G, and the air conditioners blasted out enough superoxygen to counteract the acceleration drug. Personnel came to full life again, and the command gathered on the bridge of *Delta*. Hereford was there too, standing well back, his face misleadingly calm, his eyes flicking from the forward screen to the tactical chart, from Belter's absorbed face to the undershot countenance of Commander Osgood.

Osgood looked over his shoulder at the Peace leader. His voice was gravel in a wire sieve as he said: "I still don't like that guy hanging around here. You sure he won't be better off in his quarters?"

"We've been over that," said Belter tiredly. "Commander, maybe I'm out of order, but would it be too much trouble for you to speak directly to him once in a while?"

"I am satisfied," smiled Hereford. "I quite understand his attitude. I have little to say to him, and much to say about him, which is essentially his position as far as I am concerned. It is no more remarkable that he is unfamiliar with politeness than that I should be ignorant of spatial ballistics."

Belter grinned. "O.K., O.K.—don't mind me I'm just a poor military man trying to make peace. Ill shut up and let you and the Butcher have your inimical *status quo*."

"I'll need a little quiet here for a while, if it's all the same to you, Councilman," said Osgood. He was watching the tactical chart. The red spot representing *Epsilon* was at the far right, the blur of *Sigma* at the left, and down at the bottom was *Delta*'s green spark. A golden bar

in the center of the chart showed the area on the ecliptical plane at which the Invader could be expected to pass through, and just above it was a white spot showing the Invader himself.

Osgood touched a toggle which added a diagram to the chart—a positioning diagram showing the placement of the three Death ships in relation to the target. *Sigma* and *Epsilon* were exactly in the centers of their white positioning circles; *Delta* was at the lower edge of the third circle. Osgood made a slight adjustment in the drive circuit.

“Positioning is everything,” Belter explained to Hereford. “The Death field is a resultant—a violent node of vibrations centering on the contiguous focal points of the opposed fields from *Sigma* and *Epsilon*. The beam from *Delta*—that’s us— kicks it off. There’s an enormous stress set up at that focal point, and our beam tears into it. The vibration changes frequency at random and with violence. It had been said that the fabric of space itself vibrates. That’s learned nonsense. But fluids do, and gases, of course, and colloids worst of all.”

“What would happen if the positions were not taken exactly?”

“Nothing. The two focal points of the concentrated fields from *Epsilon* and *Sigma* would not coincide, and *Delta*’s beam would be useless. And it *might* have the unhappy result of calling the Invader down on us. Not right away—he’s going too fast at right angles to our course—but I’m not crazy about the idea of being hunted down by that executioner.”

Hereford listened gravely, watching Osgood, watching the chart. “Just how great is the danger of The Death’s spreading like ripples in a pool—out in every direction from the node?”

“Very little, the way it’s set up. The node moves outward away from our three ships—again a resultant, strictly according to the parallelogram of force. How long it lasts, how intense it gets, how far it will go—we never know. It changes with what it encounters. Mass intensifies it and slows it down. Energy of almost any kind accelerates and gradually seems to dissipate it. And it varies for other reasons we don’t understand yet. Setting it up is a very complicated business, as you have seen. We don’t dare kick it off in such a way that it might encounter any of the planets, if it should happen to last long enough. We have to clear space between us and Outside of all shipping.”

Hereford shook his head slowly. “The final separation between

death and destruction,” he mused. “In ancient times, armies met on battlefields and used death alone to determine the winner. Then, gradually, destruction became the most important factor—how much of the enemy’s material could you destroy? And then, with the Atomic Wars, and the Dust, death alone became the end of combat again. Now it has come full circle, and we have found a way to kill, to punish and torture, to dissolve, slowly and insistently, colloidal cells, and still leave machines unharmed. This surpasses the barbarism of jellied gasoline. It takes longer, and—”

“It’s complete,” Belter finished.

“Stations!”

Osgood’s voice sliced raggedly through the quiet bridge. The screen-studded bulkhead beside him winked and flickered with acknowledgments, as tacticians, technicians, astrogators, ballistics men, and crewmen reported in. All three ships were represented, and a master screen collected and summarized the information, automatically framing the laggards’ screen with luminous red. There was little of the red showing, and in seconds it disappeared. Osgood stepped back, glanced at the master screen and then at the chart

On it, the ship symbols were centered in their tactical circles.

The commander turned away and for the first time in these weary months he spoke directly to Hereford: “Would you like the honor of triggering?”

Hereford’s nostrils dilated, but his voice was controlled. He put his hands behind his back. “Thank you, no.”

“I thought not,” said the Butcher, and there was a world of insult in his scraping voice.

Before him was a triangular housing from which projected three small levers with round grips. One was red, one blue. The third was set between and in front of the others, and was green. He pulled the two nearest him. Immediately a red line appeared on the chart, running from *Epsilon*’s symbol to the golden patch, and a blue line raced out from *Sigma* to meet it. Just above the gold hovered the white spot representing the Invader. Osgood watched it narrowly as it dipped toward the gold and the junction of the red and blue lines. He rested his hand on the green lever, made one last check of the screens, and snatched it back. Obediently, a thin, bright green line appeared on the chart. A purple haze clouded the gold.

“That’s it!” breathed Belter. “The purple, there-The Death!”

Hereford, shaking, leaned back against the bulkhead. He folded his arms, holding tightly to his elbows, obviously trying to get a grip on much more.

“Scan him!” spat Osgood, “This I’ve got to see!”

Belter leapt forward. “Commander! You don’t ... you *can’t* beam him! Remember what happened at Outpost?”

Osgood swore. “We’ve got so much stuff between here and there already that a scanning beam isn’t going to make that much difference. He’s done, anyway!” he added exultantly.

The large scanning screen flicked into colors which swirled and fused into the sharp image of the Invader. Since the beam tracked him exactly, there was no sign of motion. “Get me a diagrammatic!” bellowed Osgood. His small eyes were wide, his cheeks puffed out, his lips wet.

The lower quarter of the screen faded, went black, then suddenly bore a reduced image of the Invader. Apparently creeping toward him was a faint, ever-brightening purple mist.

“Right on the nose!” gritted Belter. “He’s sailing right into it!”

Startlingly, the large actual image showed signs of life. A stream of blue white fire poured out of the ship side.

“What do you know!” whistled Osgood. “He’s got jets after all! He knows there’s something ahead of him, doesn’t know what it is, and is going to duck it if he has to smear his crew all up and down the bulkheads!”

“Look!” cried Belter, pointing at the chart. “Why, he’s pulling into a curve that ... that— Man, oh man, he’s killing off all hands! He can’t turn like that!”

“Maybe he wants to get it over with quickly. Maybe he’s run into The Death somewhere before,” crowed Osgood. “Afraid to face it. Hey, Belter, the inside of that ship’s going to be a pretty sight. The Death’ll make jelly of ‘em, and that high-G turn’ll lay the jelly like paint out of an airbrush!”

“Ex ... ex—” was as much as Hereford could say as he turned and

tottered out. Belter took a step after him, hesitated, and then went back to stand before the chart.

Purple and gold and white, red and green and blue coruscated together. Slowly, then, the white spot moved toward the edge of the puddle of color.

“Commander! He’s still side-jetting!”

“Why not?” said the Butcher gleefully. “That’s the way his controls were set when his command got emulsified. Hell blow off his fuel in a while, and we can board him.”

There was a soft click from the master communications screen and a face appeared on it. “*Epsilon*,” the man said.

“Good work, Hosier,” said Osgood, rubbing his hands.

“Thank you, sir,” said the captain of the Martian vessel. “Commander, my astrogators report an extrapolation of the derelict’s change of course. If he keeps jetting, he’s going to come mighty close.”

“Watch him then,” said Osgood. “If he comes too close, get out of his way. I’ll stake my shoulder boards on your safety.” He laughed. “He’s a dead duck. You’ll be able to clear him. I don’t care if it’s only by fifty meters.”

The Martian saluted. Osgood checked him before he could fade. “Hoster!”

“Yes sir.”

“I know you Martians. Trigger happy. Whatever happens, Hoster, you are not to bomb or ray that derelict. Understand?”

“Roger, sir,” said the Martian stiffly, and faded.

“Those Martians,” said Osgood. “Bloodthirsty bunch.”

Belter said: “Commander, sometimes I understand how Hereford feels about you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” said the Butcher.

They spent the next two hours watching the tactical chart. The Death generators had long ago been cut out, and The Death itself showed on the chart as a dwindling purple stain, headed straight

Outside and already fading. But the derelict was still blasting from its side jets, and coming about in an impossible curve. The Martian astrogators had been uncomfortably right, and Captain Hoster had been instructed to take evasive action.

Closer and closer came the white spot to the red one that was *Epsilon*. Viewers were clamped on both ships: the Martian had begun to decelerate powerfully to get out of that ratiocinated curve.

“Doesn’t look so good,” said Belter, after a careful study of the derelict’s trajectory.

“Nonsense,” said Osgood worriedly. “But it’d be more than a little silly to lose a ship after we’ve whipped the enemy. “He turned to the control bulkhead. “Get me *Epsilon*. ”

He had started his famous monotone of profanity before the screen finally lit up. Hosier’s face was flushed—blotched, really. “What’s the matter?” snapped Osgood. “You take your own sweet time answering. Why haven’t you taken any *momentomine*?”

Captain Hoster clutched the rim of his communicator. “Lissen,” he said thickly. ” ‘Nvader out t’ get us, see. Nobody push Martian around. ‘S dirty Jovian trick.”

“Acceleration disease,” said Belter quietly. “He must’ve had some crazy idea of keeping away from the drug so he’d be able to keep on the alert.”

“Hoster! You’re hopped up. You can’t take *momentomine* for as many years as you have and stay sober under deceleration without it. You’re relieved. Take a dose and turn in. Put your second on.”

“Lissen, Butch, ol’ horse,” mouthed the Martian. “I know what I’m doin’, see? I don’t want trouble with *you*. Busy, see? Now, you jus’ handle your boat an’ I’ll handle mine. I’m gonna give that Jovian a case of Titanitis ‘f ‘e gets wise with me,” And the screen went blank.

“Hoster!” the commander roared. “Sparks! Put that maniac on again!”

A speaker answered promptly: “Sorry, sir. Can’t raise him.”

In helpless fury Osgood turned to Belter. “If he so much as throws a dirty look at that derelict, I’ll break him to an ammo passer and put him on the sun side of Mercury. We *need* that derelict!”

“What for?” asked Belter, and then wondered why he had asked, for he knew the answer. Hereford’s influence, probably. It would be Hereford’s question, if he were still here.

“Four drives we don’t know anything about. A warp-camouflaged disrupter bomb. A chain-instigating ray, that blew up the asteroid last year. And probably lots more. Man, that’s a warship!”

“It sure is,” said Belter. “It certainly is.” *Peace Amalgamated*, he thought. *A great step forward*.

“Get ‘em both on a screen,” Osgood rapped. “They’re close enough— Hey, Belter, look at the way that ship is designed. See how it can check and turn that way?”

“No, I— Oh! I see what you mean. Uses lateral jets—but what laterals!”

“Functional stuff,” said Osgood. “We could’ve had that a hundred years ago, but for naval tradition. We put all our drive back aft. We get a good in-line thrust, sure. But look what he’s got! The equivalent of ten or twelve of our stern-tube assemblies. What kind of people were they, that could stand that kind of thing?”

Belter shook his head. “If they built it that way, they could stand it.” He looked thoughtfully up at the derelict’s trajectory. “Commander, you don’t suppose—”

Apparently struck by the same awful thought, Osgood said uneasily, “Certainly not. The Death. They went through The Death.”

“Yes,” said Belter. He sounded relieved, but he did not feel relieved. He watched the screen, and then clutched Osgood’s arm.

Osgood swore and sprang to the control bulkhead. “Get *Epsilon*! Tell him to cease fire and then report to me! Blast the hub-forted fun of a plistener! I’ll pry him loose from his—”

Belter grunted and threw his arm over his eyes as the screen blazed. The automatic shields went up, and when he could see again, the screen showed him the Invader. *Epsilon* wasn’t there at all.

After the excitement had died down a little, Osgood slumped into a chair. “I wish we’d had a Jovian ship out there instead,” he rasped. “I don’t care what they did to us during the war, or anything else. They could obey orders. When they say they’ll do a thing, you can bet

on it. What's the score on that business of the Jovians' electing themselves out, anyhow?"

Belter told him how the Jovian delegate had been insulted at the Council.

"Those hot-headed, irresponsible Martians!" said the Butcher. "Why in time did that drunken cretin have to fire on the derelict?"

"What derelict?" Belter asked dryly.

Osgood stared at him. Belter pointed at the chart. The white spot was slowly swinging toward the green—toward *Delta*. On the screen, the Invader still gleamed. It was not blasting any more.

One of the technician's screens flashed. "Detection reporting, sir."

"Report."

"Invader's Type Two drive radiation showing strong, sir."

"R-Roger."

The screen winked out. Commander Osgood opened his mouth, held it open silently for an unbearably long moment, and then carefully closed it again. Belter bit the in-sides of his cheeks to keep from roaring with hysterical laughter. He knew that the Butcher was trying to swear, and that he had met a situation for which no swearing would be adequate. He had shot his vituperative bolt. Finally, weakly, he said the worst thing he could think of—a thing that until then had been unthinkable.

He said: "They're not dead."

Belter did not feel like laughing any more. He said: "They went through The Death, and they're not dead."

"There is no defense against The Death," said the commander authoritatively. Belter nodded.

One of the screens flashed, and a voice said impersonally: "Mathematics."

"Go on," said the Butcher.

"The derelict's course will intersect ours, sir, unless—"

“Don’t say ‘derelict,’” whispered Osgood. “Say ‘Invader.’” He lay back and, closing his eyes, swabbed his face with a tissue. Then the muscles in his jaw clenched and he rose and stood erect before the control bulkhead, pulling the wrinkles out of his tunic. “Batteries. Train around to the Invader. Tech! Put the batteries on auto. Everything—torpedoes, rays, artillery. Now give me all hands. All hands! Prepare to abandon ship. *Delta* will engage the enemy on automatics. Life craft to scatter. Take your direction from your launching port and maintain it until you observe some decisive action between *Delta* and the Invader. Fill up with *momentomine* and give your craft everything they can take. Over.” He swung to Belter.

“Councilman! Don’t argue with me. What I want to do is stay here and fight. What I *will* do is abandon ship with the rest of you. My only reason is so I can have another chance to take a poke at a Martian. Of all the blundering, stupid, childish things for Hoster to do, taking a pot shot at that killer out there was the most—”

Belter very nearly reminded the commander that Hoster had been instructed to let the “derelict” pass within fifty meters if necessary. He swallowed the comment. It didn’t matter, anyway. Hoster and his crew had been good men, and *Epsilon* a good ship. All dead now, all smashed, all gone to lengthen the list that had started on Outpost.

“You know your abandon-ship station, don’t you, Belter? Go to your quarters and haul out that white-livered old pantywaist and take him with you. I’ll join you as soon as everyone else is off the ship. Jump!”

Belter jumped. Things were happening too fast for him, and he found it almost pleasant to use someone else’s intelligence rather than hunt for his own.

Hereford was sitting on the edge of his bunk. “What’s the matter, Belter?”

“Abandon ship!”

“I know that,” said the older man patiently. “When they have an ‘all hands’ call on one of these ships there’s no mistaking it. I want to know what’s the matter.”

“We’re under attack. Invader.”

“Ah.” Hereford was very calm. “It didn’t work.”

“No,” said Belter. “It didn’t.”

“I’ll stay here, I think.”

“You’ll *what?*”

Hereford shrugged. “What’s the use? What do you think will happen to the peaceful philosophy when news gets out that there is a defense against The Death? Even if a thousand or a million Invader ships come, nothing will keep us from fighting each other. I’m—tired.”

“Hereford.” He waited until the old man lifted his head, met his eyes. “Remember that day in the anteroom? Do we have to go through that again?”

Hereford smiled slowly. “Don’t bother, friend. You are going to have trouble enough after you leave. As for me—well, the most useful thing I can be now is a martyr.”

Belter went to the bulkhead and pressed into his personal storage. He got his papers and a bottle of viski. “All right,” he said, “let’s have a quick one before I go.” Hereford smiled and accepted. Belter put all the *momentomine* in Hereford’s drink, so that when they left the ship he, Belter, passed out cold. From what he heard later he missed quite a show. *Delta* slugged it out with the Invader. She fought until there was nothing but a top turret left, and it kept spitting away at the enemy until a disrupter big enough for half a planet wiped it out. She was a good ship too. The Invader went screaming up into the celestial north again, leaving the terrified *Sigma* alone. Belter regained consciousness in the life craft along with the commander and Hereford. Hereford looked like an illustration in the Old Testament which Belter had seen when he was a child. It was captioned “And Moses Threw Down and Broke the Two Tablets of Stone.”

Sigma picked them up. She was a huge old Logistics vessel, twice reconverted—once from the Colonial Trade, once as the negative plant of The Death. She had a main hold in her like a convention hall, and a third of it was still empty in spite of the vast pile plant she carried. Her cargo port was open, and *Delta*’s life craft were being warped in and stacked inside, along with what wreckage could be salvaged for study.

The place was a hive. Spacesuited crews floated the boats in, handling them with telescoping rods equipped with a magnetic grapple at each end. One end would be placed on the hull of a boat, the other on the deck or bulkhead or on a stanchion; and then by

contracting or expanding the rod by means of its self-contained power unit, the boat would be pushed or pulled to its stack.

The boats had completed their rendezvous after two days of signaling and careful jetting. All were accounted for but two, which had probably tangled with debris. The escape of so many was largely due to the fact that there was very little wreckage large enough to do any damage after the last explosion.

Osgood's boat hovered outside until the last, and by the time it was warped in all the others had unloaded and their crews were inboard, getting refreshment and treatment. By the time the little "Blister" had been racked, the cargo port was sealed and the compartment refilled with air. *Sigma*'s captain opened the boat's hatch with his own hands, and Osgood crawled out, followed by a dazed Belter and a sullen Hereford.

"Your ship, sir," said the captain of *Sigma*, formally, in the traditional presentation of a ship and its facilities to a superior.

"Yeah. I need one at the moment," said the Butcher wryly. He stretched, looked around. "Get any parts of the Martian?"

"No, sir," said the captain. He was a worried-looking, gangly specimen from the Venusian Dome. His name had so many syllables that only the first three were used. They were Holovik. "And little enough from *Delta*, I'm sorry to say. Wh ... what happened?"

"You saw it, didn't you? What do you think?"

"I'll say it, if you can't get it out," said Osgood bluntly. "He has a defense against The Death. Isn't that fine?"

"Yes sir." The horizontal lines across Captain Holovik's forehead deepened, and the corners of his mouth turned down. "Fine."

"Don't burst into tears!" snapped the commander. He looked around taking stock of the salvage. "Get all available techs on that scrap. Find out if any of it is radioactive, and if so how much of what type. What's that?"

"That" was a thirty-foot tapered cylinder with three short mast antennae projecting at right angles to the long axis, near each rounded end.

"I don't know for sure, sir," said Holovik. "I knew that there were

... ah ... weapons, new ones. We don't get information the way we used to during the war—"

"Stop mumbling, man! If that's a secret weapon, it isn't from *Delta*."

Belter put in, "It isn't from *Epsilon* either. I went over the specs of everything aboard all of these vessels."

"Then where did-Oh!" His "Oh!" was echoed by Belter and two junior officers who had overheard the conversation. It was a most respectful sound. Also respectful was the unconscious retreat all hands took to the inboard bulkhead.

Hereford, who had not spoken a word for nearly a day, asked: "What's the matter? What is it?"

"Don't know," breathed Belter, "but I'd like to see it out of here. Way out. It's the Invader's."

"G-get it out of here. *Jump!*"

They piled into the inboard section and sealed the cargo inspection hatch behind them, leaving three spacesuited e.m. and an officer to worry the object tenderly out of the port.

"You're a cretin," Osgood told the captain. "You're a drooling incompetent. Whatever possessed you to bring in an unidentified object?"

"I ... it was ... I don't know," stammered Holovik. Belter marveled at the degree of worriment the man's face could register.

A junior officer with communication pips spoke up. "That was the object which didn't register on the detectors until it was within a mile, sir," he reminded. "I still can't understand it, commander. Our detectors—all of 'em—are sensitive to fifty thousand at the very least. I'm ready to swear our equipment was in order, and yet we had no sign of this thing until it was right on top of us."

"Somebody in Detection asleep," growled the Butcher. "Wait, commander," Belter turned toward the young sigman. "How was this thing bearing?"

"Right on the ship, sir. An intersection course from down left forrad, as I remember. We deflected it and then brought it about with

the short tractors.”

“It just appeared out of nowhere, eh?” rasped Osgood. “And so you invited it in.”

“There was a good deal of debris in that sector, commander,” said Holovik faintly. “We were busy ... tracers sometimes give resultant indications when they pick up two separated objects simultaneously —”

“Yeah, and then they indicate something where nothing is. They *don't* indicate nothing where there is something. Why, I'll break you to —”

“It seems to me,” said Belter, who had been pursuing his own line of reasoning, “that what we have here is mighty similar to what hit Outpost. Remember? They put a tracer on it as they saw it leave the Invader. It blanked out. They got no radiation or radar reflection at all. But it came in and wiped out the base.”

“The nonexistent, hypothetical ‘warper,’” said Hereford, with a wispy of his old smile.

Osgood glanced at him coldly. “If you're trying to tell me that the Invader used a warper to protect himself from The Death, you're showing your ignorance. The Death is a vibration, *not* a radiation. It's a physical effect, not an energy phenomenon.”

“Blast The Death!” spat Belter. “Don't you see what we've got here? It's one of their disrupters. Short range—always short range. Don't you see? It *is* a warper, and for some reason it can only carry a limited amount of power. The Invader started popping away at *Delta*, and when she fought back, he let loose with everything he had. This must've been one of his disrupters which was launched while *Delta* was in one piece and arrived after she'd been blasted. Then it went right on seeking, but ran out of fuel before it reached Sigma. That's why it suddenly appeared to the detectors.”

“Now, that makes sense,” said the Butcher, looking at Belter as if he were seeing him for the first time. He creased his lower lip sharply with his thumb and forefinger. “Warp camouflage, eh? H-m-m-m. I wonder if we could get a look at that unit. Maybe we could build something like it and get close enough to that devil to do some good.” He turned to the fretful Holovik. “Captain! See if you can get a couple of techs to volunteer to de-fuse that thing. If you can't get volunteers —”

"I'll get them, sir," said Holovik, for the first time looking a little happier. It made him appear wistful instead of mournful.

It was easier to count those not volunteering, once the proposition went out over the intercom. In a few minutes *Sigma* lay off a couple of hundred miles to stand by while a crack squad worked over the drifting bomb. They carried three viewers, and the control bridge of the Death ship was mobbed with experts. Every move was carefully discussed; every possibility was carefully explored before a move was made.

They did it. It was slow, and suspense reached an agonized pitch; but once it was done and could be reviewed, it was unbelievably simple. The warhead was clamped to the main hull of the bomb. The activators were in the head, controlled simply by a couple of rods. The seeking gear, proximity circuits, power source, drive, and what was apparently the camouflage unit were all packed into the hull.

A torch was clamped to the warhead, which was cast adrift. The precious hull was towed a few miles with reaction-pistols and picked up by the ship, which then got clear and rayed the virulent little warhead into shocking, flaring extinction.

In shops and laboratories throughout the System, feverish work was carried on over plans and mock-ups of the alien weapon. One of the first things discovered about it was that the highly theoretical and very popular term "warper" was a misnomer. The camouflage was an ingenious complexity of wiring in concentric "skins" in the hull. Each impinging radiation caused the dielectric constant of the hull to change so that it reradiated that exact frequency, at the same intensity as received, but a hundred and eighty degrees out of phase. The heart of the device was what might have been the thousandth generation descended from a TR tube. It hunted so constantly, and triggered radiations with so little lag, that the device could handle several frequencies almost simultaneously.

What used most of the power was the drive. It involved a magnetic generator and a coil which carried magnetic flux. Induced in this was an extremely intense gravitic field, self-canceling forward and on all sides. The intensified "reverse" gravity pressure was, therefore, at the stern. Maneuvering was accomplished by variations in field strength by inductance-coupling of the mag-flux coils.

The hull was a totally absorbent black, and the missile was made of an alloy which was transparent to hard radiation.

All information was pooled, and sub-projects were constantly assigned from Science Center. Etherfac transmission was full of last-minute reports on phases of the problem, interspersed with frequent communiques on the last known position of the Invader. He had indulged in an apparently aimless series of convolutions for several weeks following D-Day, evidently to assess his damage. After that he had maintained a great circular course, parallel in plane to the Solar ecliptic, and the assumption was that he was undergoing repairs and engaging in reconnaissance. Both were certainly indicated, for he must have undergone an incredible strain in that wild curve on D-Day. And as before, he was the symbol of terror. If he struck, where would he strike? If not, he would leave. Then, would he be back? Alone, or with a fleet?

Belter's life was a continuous flurry of detail, but he found time to wonder about several things. The Jovians, for example. They had been a great help in the duplication of the camouflage device, particularly in their modification of the fission power plant it carried. The Jovian improvement was a disruption motor using boron, an element which appeared nowhere in the original. It gave vastly more range to the Solarian device. And yet—there was something about the Jovian willingness that was not quite in harmony with their established behavior patterns. The slight which Leess had suffered from the Martian was not, after all, a large thing in itself, but the fact that Leess had led his planet into a policy of noncooperation made it large. The sudden reversal of this policy since D-Day was more than puzzling. A hundred times Belter shrugged the question off, grunting "Jovians are funny people," and a hundred times it returned to him.

There was another unprecedented worry. The Martian delegate called Belter aside one afternoon and presented it to him. "It's that Hereford," the man said, scratching his sunburned neck. "He's too quiet. I know he lost a mess of 'face' over his vote on The Death, but he still has a following. More than I like to think about."

"So?"

"Well, when the big day comes, when we send a formation of the new camouflaged boats out there, what's to keep him from opening his trap and making trouble for us?"

"Why should he?"

“You know what the pacifists are after. If we fitted out a bunch of these new gadgets with disrupters and wiped the Invader out, they’d have no kick. They don’t want that Death-defense to get back to the System. You know that.”

“Hm-m-m. And how would you handle this on Mars?” The Martian grinned.

“Why, I reckon Brother Hereford would have a little accident. Enough to keep him quiet, anyhow—maybe for a little while, maybe for—”

“I thought as much.” Belter let himself burn for a luxurious second before replying. “Forget it. Supposing what you say is true—and I don’t grant that it is—what else can you think of?”

“Well now, I think it would be a bright idea to send a camouflage force out without consulting the Council. That way, if Hereford is waiting for the psychological moment to blow his mouth off, we’ll get what we’re after before he knows what’s happening. *If* we can keep the lid on it, that is.”

Belter shook his head. “Sorry friend. No can do. We can stretch a point of security and take a military action without informing the people, but there’s no loophole in the charter which will let any of us take military action without the knowledge of the Council. Sorry. Anyway, thanks for the tip.”

This, like the Jovian matter, was a thing he shrugged off and forgot—five or six times a day. He knew the case-hardened character which lived behind Hereford’s dignified mien, and he respected it for what it was and for what it could do.

There was a solution to these problems. He laughed when it occurred to him, smiled when it recurred; but he frowned when he realized that he had already decided. He must have, for he found himself slipping Addison’s report into a private drawer, of his desk. Addison was the Tech in charge of the local camouflage project. It was top secret and had been delivered, sealed, by an orderly. It invited him to inspect a two-place craft which had been finished and tested, fueled and equipped. The report should have gone to the Agenda.

He called Hereford, and when they were alone he asked, without preliminary: “Are you interested in heading off a war?”

“A rhetorical question, certainly.”

“Nope. Question two. Have you anything special to do the next few weeks?”

“Why I—nothing out of the ordinary,” said Hereford, sadly. Since his historic “Exception” speech, he had had little enough to do.

“Well, clear your social calendar, then. No, I’m not kidding. This is hot. How soon can you be ready for a little trip?”

Hereford studied him. “In about thirty minutes. I can tell by the way you act that you’d want it that soon.”

“You’re psychic. Right here, then, in thirty minutes.”

Within two hours they were in space, aboard a swift scoutship. Behind him Belter left a bewildered deputy-chairman with a brief authorization in his hands, and an equally astonished Master-Tech, both of whom were sworn to silence. In the scoutship were a sworn-in crew and the black hulk of the camouflaged lifeboat.

For the first two days out he left Hereford to twiddle his thumbs in the cramped recreation room of the ship, while he closeted himself with the skipper to work out an approach course. It took him half of the first day to convince the young man that he was in his right mind and that he wanted to board the Invader—two facts that had been regarded, during the past three years, as mutual incompatibilities.

The approach was plotted to permit the boat to overtake the Invader using a minimum of power. The little craft was to be launched from the scout at high speed on a course which would put it in an elliptical orbit in respect to the sun. This ellipse was at right angles to the plane of the circular course the Invader had been maintaining for the past few weeks. The ellipse intersected this circle in two places, and the launching time was set to synchronize these points of intersection with the predicted position of the Invader on its own course. The big *if*, naturally, was whether or not the Invader would maintain course and speed. He might. He had, twice before, once for nine months and once for over a year. If Belter watched his tables, and spent enough time with his tetrant and calculex, it would require only an occasional nudge of power to follow his course, or to correct it for any variations of the Invader’s predicted position.

After the matter was settled, and he had slept, he rejoined Hereford. The old man was apparently staring right through the open

book on his knee, for his eyes were wide and unmoving. Belter slumped down beside him and expelled an expressive breath. “What a way to make a living!”

Amusement quirked the corners of, Hereford’s mouth. “What?”

“Finding tough ways to die,” grinned the chairman. “I’m ready to tell you about this thing, if you want me to.”

Hereford closed his book and put it by.

“It’s the Jovians, first of all,” said Belter, without preliminary. “Those critters think so well, so fast, and so differently that it scares me. It’s tough ... no, it’s downright foolish to try to judge their actions on a human basis. However, they pulled one stunt that was so very human that it completely escaped me. If Mars had tried it, I’d have been on to it instantly. It’s taken a long time for it to percolate, since it concerns the Jovians. Do you remember how ready they were to help out after D-Day? Why do you suppose that was?”

“I would judge,” said Hereford thoughtfully, “that they had awakened to their responsibility as members of the System. The Invader had a defense against the ultimate weapon, the emergency was intensified, and they pitched in to help for the common good.”

“That’s what I thought, too. Has it, occurred to you at all what would probably happen if Jupiter—and only Jupiter —had a defense against The Death?”

“Why, I don’t think they would—”

Belter broke in roughly. “Never mind what you would like to believe. What would happen?”

“I see what you mean,” said Hereford. His face was white. “We came up from almost certain defeat and won the war when we developed The Death. If Jupiter had a defense, we would be no match for them.”

“That’s way understated,” said Belter.

“But ... but they signed a peace treaty! They’re disarming! They won’t break their word!” cried Hereford.

“Of course they won’t! If they get their hands on that defense, they’ll calmly announce the fact, give us time to prepare, even, and

then declare war and wipe us out. There's a great deal of pride involved, of course. I'll venture to say that they'd even help us arm if we'd let them, to make the struggle equal to begin with. They're bugs for that kind of fairness. But the whole System knows that machine for machine, unit for unit, Jovian for man, there is no equality. They're too much for us. It is only our crazy, ingrained ability to manufacture suicidal weapons which gives us the upper hand. The Jovians are too wise to try to conquer a race which insists on introducing murder-machines without any due regard for their future significance. Remember what Leess said when the Martian insulted him? 'Earth dead, Jupiter dead, Mars dead. Good.' They know that unless we as a race are let alone, we will certainly find a way to kill off our neighbors, because as a race we don't care if we get killed in the process."

Hereford shuddered. "I'd hate to think you were right. It makes Peace Amalgamated look so very useless, for all its billions of members."

Belter cracked his knuckles. "I'm not trying to tell you that humans are basically rotten, or that they are fated to be what they always have been. Humanity has come very close to extinction at least four times that I know of, through some such kind of mass suicide. But the existence of Peace Amalgamated does indicate that it believes there is a way out, although I can't help thinking that it'll be a long haul to get us 'cured.'"

"Thank you," said Hereford sincerely. "Sometimes I think you might be a more effective peace worker than I can ever hope to be. Tell me—what made you suspect that the Jovians might be after the defense device for themselves?"

"A very recent development. You must know that the one thing which makes our use of the camouflage unit practicable is the new power plant. With it we can run up to the Invader and get inside his detectors, starting from far out of his range. Now, that was a Jovian design. They built it, ergo they had it first.

"In other words, between the time of its invention and the time they turned it over to us, they had the edge on us. That being the case, there would be only one reason why, in their supreme self-confidence, they would turn it over to us; namely, they didn't need that edge any more!"

"It fits," said Hereford sorrowfully.

“Good. Now, knowing Jovians—and learning more every day, by the way—I conclude that they gave us the drive, not because they had something better, but because it had already served its purpose for them. I am convinced that Jovian camouflage boats are on the way to the Invader now— and perhaps they have even ... but I’d rather not think about that.” He spread his arms, dropped them. “Hence our little jaunt. We’ve got to get there first. If we’re not first, we have to do what we can when we get there.”

The boat, lightless, undriven, drifted toward the Invader. At this arc of the chosen ellipse, its velocity was low, and suspense was as ubiquitous a thing as the susurrus of the camouflage unit which whispered away back aft. Hereford and Belter found themselves talking in whispers too, as if their tense voices could carry through those insulated bulkheads, across the dim void to the mysterious crew of the metal murderer which hung before them.

“We’re well inside his meteor deflectors,” gritted Belter. “I don’t know what to think. Are we really going to be able to get to him, or is he playing with us?”

“He doesn’t play,” said Hereford grimly. “You will excuse the layman’s question, but I don’t understand how there can be a possibility of his having no detector for just this kind of approach. Since he uses bombs camouflaged the way we are, he must have some defense against them.”

“His defense seems to be in the range of his deflectors,” answered the chairman. “Those bombs were hunters. That is, they followed the target wherever it moved. The defense would be to stall off the bomb by maneuvering until it ran out of fuel, like the one we picked up. Then his meteor-repellers would take care of it.”

“It was obviously the most effective weapon in his arsenal,” said Hereford hopefully.

“As far as we know,” said Belter from the other end of the emotional spectrum. Then, “I can’t stand this. I’m going to try a little drive. I feel as if we’d been hanging here since nuclear power was discovered.”

Hereford tensed, then nodded in the dark. The boat was hardly the last word in comfort. The two men could lie prone, or get up to a cramped all-four position. Sitting was possible if the cheekbones were kept between the knees and the occipital bones tight against the

overhead. They had been in that prison for more days than they cared to recall.

Belter palmed the drive control and moved it forward. There was no additional sound from the power unit, but the slight accelerative surge was distinctly felt.

"I'm going to circle him. No point being too careful. If he hasn't taken a crack at us by this time, I don't think he's going to." He took the steering lever in his other hand and the boat's nose pulled "up" in relation to the Invader's keel-plane. There was no fear of momentum-damage; the controls would not respond to anything greater than a 5-G turn without a special adjustment.

Within four hours the craft was "over" the alien. The ugly, blind-looking shape, portless and jetless, was infuriating. It went its way completely unheeding, completely confident. Belter had a mad flashback to a childish romance. She hadn't been a very pretty girl, but to have her near him drove him nearly insane. It was because of her perfect poise, her mask. He did not want her. He wanted only to break that calm, to smash his way into the citadel of her *savoir faire*. He had felt like that, and she was not evil. This ship, now—it was completely so. There was something unalive, implacable, inescapable about this great murderous vessel.

Something clutched his arm. He started violently, bumped his head on the overhead, his hand closing on the velocity control. The craft checked itself and he bumped his head again on the forward port. He swore more violently than Hereford's grip on his arm called for, and said in irritation: "What?"

"A—hole. A hatch or something. Look."

It was a black shadow on the curve of the gray-shadowed hull. "Yes ... yes. Shall we—" Belter swallowed and tried again. "Shall we walk into his parlor?"

"Yes. Ah... Belter—"

"Hm-m-m?"

"Before we do—you might as well tell me. Why did you want me to come?"

"Because you're a fighting man."

“That’s an odd joke.”

“It is not. You have had to fight every inch of the way, Hereford.”

“Perhaps so. But don’t tell me you brought me along for the potential use of my mislaid pugnacities.”

“Not *for* them, friend. Because of them. You want the Invader destroyed, for the good of the System. I want it saved, for the good of the System, as I see it. You could achieve your end in one of two ways. You could do it through Peace Amalgamated, back at Central. It would only need a few words to obstruct this whole program. *Or*, you could achieve it yourself, here. I brought you to keep you from speaking to Peace Amalgamated. I think having you here where I can watch you is less of a risk to the procurement of the Death defense.”

“You’re a calculating devil,” said Hereford, his voice registering something between anger and admiration. “And suppose I try to destroy the ship—given, of course, the chance?”

“I’d kill you first,” said Belter with utter sincerity.

“Has it occurred to you that I might try the same thing, with the same amount of conviction?”

“It has,” Belter replied promptly. “Only you wouldn’t do it. You could not be driven to killing. Hereford, you pick the oddest times to indulge in dialectics.”

“Not at all,” said Hereford good-humoredly. “One likes to know where one stands.”

Belter gave himself over to his controls. In the back of his mind was a whirling ball of panic. Suppose the power plant should fail, for example. Or suppose the Invader should send out a questing beam of a frequency which the camouflage unit could not handle. How about the meteor deflector? Would they be crushed if the ship located them and hurled them away with a repeller? He thought with sudden horror of the close-set wiring in the boat. Shorts do happen, and sometimes oxidation and vibration play strange tricks with wiring. *Do something*, his inner voice shouted. *Right or wrong, do something.*

They drifted up to the great silver hull, and the hole seemed to open hungrily to them as they neared it. Belter all but stopped the craft in relation to the ship, and nosed it forward with a view to entering the hatch without touching the sides.

“In the visirecord, didn’t the camouflage disrupter at Outpost show up for a moment on the screen as it left the ship?” Hereford whispered.

“Yeah. So what? Oh! You mean the cam unit was shut off until the bomb was clear of the ship. You have something there, Hereford. Maybe we’d better shut it off before we go in. I can see where it would act like something less than camouflage, enclosed in a metal chamber and re-radiating all the stray stuff in there plus the reflections of its own output.” He put his hand out to the camouflage control. “But I’m going to wait until we’re practically inside. I don’t relish the idea of being flung off like a meteorite.”

Handling the controls with infinite care, touching them briefly and swiftly with his fingertips, Belter tooled the boat through the hatch. He switched off the camouflage effect and had the boat fully inboard of the Invader before he realized he was biting his tongue.

Surprisingly, the chamber they entered was illuminated. The light was dim, shadowless, and a sickly green. The overhead and bulkheads themselves, or a coating on them, accounted for the light. There was a large rack on the forward partition containing row on row of the disruption bombs, minus their warheads. Above each ended a monorail device which ran to a track ending in a solid-looking square door—obviously the storage space for the warheads. Another hoist and monorail system connected the hulls themselves with the open hatch. This trackage, and the fact that the chamber was otherwise untenanted, indicated that the bomb assembly, fuse setting, and dispatching were completely automatic.

“Camouflage again,” gritted Belter. “This boat is enough like those bombs to fit sort of cozily in one of those racks. In this crazy light no one would notice it.”

“This light is probably not crazy to those on board,” said Hereford.

“We’ll worry about that later. Slip into your suit.”

From the after locker they drew the light pressure suits around themselves and secured them. Belter demonstrated the few controls—oxygen, humidity, temperature, magnetism, and gravity, to be quite sure the old man was familiar with them all. “And this is the radio. I think it will be safe to use the receivers. But don’t transmit unless it’s absolutely necessary. If we stick close together we can talk by

conduction—touching our helmets.”

It was the work of only a few minutes to grapple the weightless craft into the rack. It was a fair fit. When they had finished, Belter reached in and took out two blasters. He secured the escape hatch and turned to Hereford, handing him one of the guns. Hereford took it, but leaned forward to touch his transparent helmet to Belter’s. His voice came through hollowly but clearly.

“What’s this for?”

“Morale,” said Belter briefly. “You don’t have to use it. If we’re watched, ‘Two armed men’ sounds better than ‘Two men, one armed.’”

They groped to the inboard partition and followed it cautiously aft. The touch of the metal under his gloves brought a shocking realization to Belter of where he actually was, and for a moment his knees threatened to give way. Deep inside him, his objective self watched, shaking its figment of a head in amazement. Because he had secured a lifeboat equipped for the job, he had come. Because he had gotten inside the Invader’s screens, he had approached the ship itself. Because he was close enough and a hatch was open, he had come in. *Just the way I got into the Army, and the way I got into politics*, he grinned.

They found a ladder. It led upward through a diamond-shaped opening in the overhead. The rungs were welded to the bulkhead. They were too narrow and too close together. There were dragging scuffmarks on each side, about eighteen or twenty centimeters on each side of the rungs. What manner of creature ambulated on its centerline, dragging its sides?

A Jovian.

He looked at Hereford, who was pointing at the marks, so he knew that Hereford understood, too. He shrugged and pointed upward, beckoning. They went up, Belter leading.

They found themselves in a corridor, too low to allow them to stand upright. It was triangular in cross-section, with the point down and widened to a narrow catwalk. A wear-plate was set into each side and bore the same smooth scuffs. The deck, what there was of it between the sharply sloping sides, was composed of transverse rods. A creature which could grip with claws and steady itself with the sides of a carapace could move quite freely in such a corridor regardless of gravitic or accelerative effects, within reason.

“Damn!”

Belter jumped as if stabbed. Hereford tottered on his mag-na-grips and clutched at the slanted bulkhead for support. The single syllable had roared at them from inside their helmets. The effect was such that Belter all but swallowed his tongue. He pointed at himself in the dim green light and shook his head. Hereford weakly followed suit. Neither of them had spoken.

“Lousy Jovians—”

Belter, following a sudden hunch, laid his hand on Hereford’s shoulder to suggest that he stay put, and crept back to the bomb bay opening. He lay down, and cautiously put his head over the lip.

A long, impossibly black *something* was edging across the deck down there. Belter squeezed his eyes tightly closed and opened them wide, trying to see through the foggy green radiance. At last he discerned a small figure pulling and hauling at the shadow, the bomb, the ... the lifeboat.

A human figure. A man. A man who must have come through the Invader’s defenses, even as he had. A man with a camouflaged boat.

But no one except a few Techs even knew that the boats had been completed. And the Council, of course.

The man below reached inside his boat and touched a control. It sank down to the deck next to the bomb rack as its magnetic anchors were activated. The man shut the escape hatch and shuffled toward the inboard partition, his blaster in hand, his head turning as he came.

Belter watched him until he discovered the ladder. Then he scrambled to his feet and, as fast as the peculiar footing would allow him, he scurried back to Hereford. His helmet receiver registered an angry gust of breath as the man below saw the short-paced ladder and the scuff-marks.

Belter slammed his helmet against Hereford’s. “It’s a Martian,” he gritted. “You might know it’d be a blasted Martian. Only a Martian’d be stupid enough to try to climb aboard this wagon.”

He saw Hereford’s eyebrow go up at this, but the peace-man did not make the obvious comment. He was silent as he followed Belter forward to the nearest turn in the corridor. They slipped around it, Belter conning its extension carefully. There was still, incredibly, no

sign of life.

Just around the turn there was a triangular door, set flush into the slanted wall. Belter hesitated, then pressed it. It did not yield. He scrabbled frantically over its surface, found no control of any kind. Hereford grasped his arm, checked him, and when Belter stepped back, the old man went to his knees and began feeling around on the catwalk floor. The door slid silently back.

Belter slipped in, glanced around. But for a huddled, unmoving mass of some tattered matter in the corridor, there was nothing in the room, which was small. Belter waved the old man in. Hereford hopped over the sill, felt on the floor again, and the panel slid shut.

“How did you know how to open that door?” he asked when their helmets touched.

“Their feet ... claws ... what-have-you ... are obviously prehensile, or they wouldn’t have floors that are nothing more than close-set rungs. Obviously their door handles would be in the floor.”

Belter shook his head admiringly. “See what happens when a man thinks for a living?” He turned to the door, set his head against it. Very faintly, he could hear the cautious steps of the Martian. He turned back to Hereford. “I suppose I ought to go out there and pin his ears back. Martians have nothing in their heads but muscles. He’ll walk right up to the skipper of this ship if he has to wade through the crew to do it. But I’m mighty interested in just what he’s up to. We couldn’t be much worse off than we are. Do you suppose we could follow him close enough to keep him out of trouble?”

“There is no need for caution,” said Hereford, and his voice, distorted by the helmets, was like a distant tolling bell.

“What do you mean?”

Hereford pointed to the huddled mass in the corner. Belter crossed to it, knelt, and put out a hand. Frozen substance crumbled under his touch in a way which was familiar to him. He shrank back in horror.

“It’s—dead,” he whispered.

Hereford touched helmets. “What?”

“It’s dead,” said Belter dully. “It’s—homogenized, and frozen.”

“I know. Remember the three Jovian capital ships?”

“They couldn’t stand The Death,” Belter murmured. “They opened all the locks.”

He stood up. “Let’s go get that fool of a Martian.”

They left the room and followed the corridor to its end. There was another ladder there. They climbed it, and at the top Belter paused. “I think we’d better try for the control central. That’ll be the first thing he’ll go after.”

They found it, eventually, before the Martian did, possibly because they were not being as cautious. They must have passed him en route, but such was the maze of corridors and connecting rooms that that was not surprising.

They still eschewed the use of their transmitters, since Belter preferred to find out exactly what the Martian was up to.

They had just opened a sliding door at the end of a passageway, and Belter was half through it when he stopped so suddenly that Hereford collided with him.

The room which spread before them was unexpectedly large. The bulkheads were studded with diamond-shaped indicators, and above them and over the ceiling were softly colored murals. They glowed and shimmered, and since they were the first departure from the ubiquitous dim green, their immediate effect was shocking.

In the center of the chamber was a pair of control desks, a V pointing forward and a V pointing aft, forming another of the repeated diamond forms. There was a passage space, however, between the two Vs. In their enclosure was a creature, crouching over the controls.

It was alive.

It stirred, heaving itself up off the raised portion of the deck on which it lay. It was completely enclosed in a transparent, obviously pressurized garment. As it rose, Belter and Hereford shrank back out of sight. Belter drew his blaster.

But the creature was apparently not aware of them. It turned slowly to, face the opposite corner of the room, and the sensory organ on its cephalothorax blushed pink.

There was a bold clanking from the corner of the room, which Belter felt through his shoes. Then the wall began to glow. A small section of it shone red which paled into white. It bellied momentarily, and then sagged molten. The Martian, blaster in hand, leapt through the opening. *And he could have opened that door*, thought Belter disgustedly. *Why does a Martian always have to do it the hard way?*

The Martian stopped dead when he was clear of the simmering entrance. He visibly recoiled from the sudden apparition of color, and stood awed before those magnificent murals. His gaze dropped to the center of the room.

“So there is a defense,” he snarled. His transmitter was still blatantly operating. “Come on, Jupiter. I was wise to this whole stunt. Who did you think you fooled by poisoning your own forces on Titan? Invader, huh? Some stuff! Get out of there. Move now! I know you can understand me. I want to see that Death defense and the controls. And there’s no sense trying to call your buddies. I’ve seen them all over the ship. All dead. Something saved you, and I mean to find out what it is.”

He raised his blaster. The Jovian quivered. Belter crossed his left arm across his body and grasped the edge of the door. He rested his blaster across his left forearm and squinted down the barrel. Hereford reached over his shoulder and drew the muzzle upward.

Belter turned furiously to him, but the old man shook his head and, astonishingly, smiled. His hand went to his belt. He threw his transmitter switch and said in his deep, quiet voice:

“Drop that blaster, son.”

The effect on the Martian was absolutely devastating. He went rod stiff, dropping his weapon so quickly that he all but threw it. Then he staggered backward, and they could hear his frightened gasping as he tried to regain his breath.

Belter strode out into the room and backed to the left bulkhead, stopping where he could cover both the Martian and the Jovian. Hereford shuffled over and picked up the blaster.

“P-peace Amalgamated!” puffed the Martian. “What in time are *you* doing here?”

Belter answered. “Keeping you from using your muscles instead of your brains. What do you think you’re doing?”

“Recon,” said the Martian sullenly.

“For who?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you’re doing it for Mars,” said Belter bluntly. “It would be just dandy if Mars had the Death defense now, wouldn’t it? You guys have been chafing at the bit for a long time.”

“We’re not crazy,” flashed the Martian. “We never did make peace with Jupiter, remember? We knew better. And now look.” He gestured at the Jovian. “What a pretty way to knock slices out of all the Solarian defenses. Just play Invader for a few years and scare the bedizens out of humanity. Wipe out what looks tough, and take advantage of the panic. Heh! Treaties with Jupiter! Why in blazes didn’t you exterminate them when you had the chance? Now, if Mars gets the Defense, we’ll handle the thing right. And maybe when the smoke clears away we’ll be magnanimous enough to let Earth and the Colonies work for us.”

“All blast and brawn,” marveled Belter. “The famous Martian mouth.”

“Don’t you brag about brains. I know for a fact mat our councilman tipped off that camouflage boats were being made in secret. If you didn’t act on it, it’s your hard luck.”

“In a way he did,” said Belter. “Enough I imagine, to keep his little conscience clear. I’m here, for all that.”

“Not for long,” snapped the Martian, making a long sliding step.

“Look out, Hereford!”

Belter snapped a fine-focus shot at the Martian but he was late. The Martian was behind Hereford, grappling for the blaster which the Peace delegate still held in his hand. Hereford tried to spin away but was unsure of his footing in the gravitic shoes and succeeded only in floundering. The Martian suddenly shifted his attack to the blaster at Hereford’s hip. He got it and danced clear. “I know the pantywaist won’t shoot,” he said, and laughed. “So it’s you first, Belter, and then old ‘Peace-in-our-Time.’ Then I’ll get the Death defense with or without the aid of the spider yonder.”

He swung the weapon on Belter, and the chairman knew that this

was it. He closed his eyes. The blaster-flash beat on the lids. He felt nothing. He tried to open his eyes again and was astounded to discover that he could. He stood there staring at Hereford, who had just shot the Martian through the head. The man's magnagrips held him upright as the air in his suit whiffed out, to hang in a mist like a frozen soul over his tattered head.

"I killed him, didn't I?" asked Hereford plaintively.

"To keep the peace," said Belter in a shaking voice. He skated over to the old man and took the blaster, which was still held stiffly out toward the dead man. "Killing's a comparative crime, Hereford. You've saved lives."

He went to the control table and put his hands on it, steadying himself against the broken sounds Hereford was making. He stared across the table at the great jelly-and-bone mass that was a Jovian. He would have given a lot for a translator, but such a machine had never yet been made portable.

"You. Jovian. Will you communicate? Spread that membrane for 'yes.' Contract it for 'no.'"

Yes. The creature was perfectly telepathic, but with humans it had to be one way. A translator could convert its emanations into minute electronic impulses and arrange them into idea-patterns for which words were selected.

"Is there anything on this ship which can resist The Death?"

Yes.

"You understand it?"

Yes.

"Will you share your knowledge with the Council?"

Yes.

"Can you deactivate all automatics on this ship?"

In answer the Jovian extended one of its fourth pseudo-claws, and placed it next to a control on the table. It was a small square housing, set so as to repeat the diamond motif. An orange pilot light glowed in its center, and next to it was a toggle. On the forward side of the

toggle was an extremely simple symbol—two dots connected by two lines, each two-thirds of the distance between the dots, so that for the middle third they lay parallel, contiguous. On the after side of the toggle, the symbol differed. The dots were the same, but the lines were separated. It was obviously an indication of “open” and “closed” positions. The toggle slanted forward. Belter put his hand on it, looked at the Jovian.

The membrane spread affirmatively. Jovians did not lie. He pulled the toggle back and the pilot went out.

“This General Assembly has been called,” Belter said quietly into the mike, “to clear up, once and for all, the matter of the Invader and the contingent wild and conflicting rumors about a defense against The Death, about interstellar drives, about potential war between members of the Solar Federation, and a number of other fantasies.” He spoke carefully, conscious of the transmission of his voice and image to government gatherings on all the worlds, in all the domes, and on ships.

“You know the story of my arrival, with Hereford, aboard the Invader, and the later arrival of the Martian, and his”—Belter cleared his throat—“his accidental death. Let me make it clear right now that there is no evidence that this man was representing the Martian General Government or any part of it. We have concluded that he was acting as an individual, probably because of what might be termed an excess of patriotism.

“Now, as to the presence of the Jovian on the ship—that is a perfectly understandable episode. Jupiter is a defeated nation. I venture to say that any group of us in the same situation would commit acts similar to that of this Jovian. I can say here, too, that there is no evidence of its representing any part of the Jovian Government. What it might have done with, say, a Death defense had it found one aboard is conjecture, and need not enter into this discussion.

“I have before me a transcript of this Jovian’s statement. You may rest assured that all facts have been checked; that fatigue and crystalline tests and examinations have been made of metallic samples taken from the vessel; that the half-lives of radioactive by-products in certain fission and disruption machinery have been checked and substantiate this statement. This is the transcript:

“For reasons consistent with Jovian philosophy, I took a Jovian-

built camouflaged boat and departed with it before the improved drive had been submitted to the Joint Solar Military Council. I approached the Invader cautiously and found the camouflage successful. I boarded him. I put my boat in the Invader's bomb rack, where it was well hidden in plain sight, being the same size and general shape as the Invader's bombs. I went inboard, expecting a great deal of trouble. There was none. Every port and hatch was open to space except the warhead storage, which was naturally no hiding place due to radioactivity. I proceeded to the control chamber. I found the master control to all the ship's armament.

“But my most important discovery was a thought record. The Invaders were, like Jovians, of an arthropodal type, and their image patterns were quite understandable after a little concentration. I shall quote from that record:

“We are of Sygon, greater of the two planets of Sykor, a star in Sijmak. The smaller planet, known to us as Gith, is peopled by a mad race, a mistake of nature—a race which fights and kills itself and wars on its neighbors; a race which aspires to conquer purely for the sake of conquest, which hunts for hunting's sake and kills for pleasure. While it progresses, while it cooperates, it bites itself and fights itself and is never done with its viciousness.

‘Its planet was large enough to support it, but it was not satisfied. Sygon was no place for these vicious animals, for they had to bring their atmosphere in bubbles for breathing, and Sygon's mass crushed them and made them sicken. Not needing Sygon still they were willing to fight us for it.

“We killed them by the hundreds of thousands, and still they kept coming. They devised incredible weapons to use against us, and we improved on them and hurled them back. They improved on these, completely ignoring the inevitability of their end.

“The ultimate weapon was theirs—a terrible thing which emulsified the very cells of our bodies, and there was no defense against it. The first time it was used it killed off most of our race. The rest of us threw all our resources into this, the Eternal Vengeance—this ship. It is designed to attack anything which radiates, as long as the radiations exhibit the characteristics of those produced by intelligent life. It will stay in Sykor's system, and it will attack anything which might be Gith or of Gith. Gith will strike back with its terrible weapon, and all of us on the ship will die. But the ship will go on. Gith will loose its horror and agony on Sygon, and our race will be dead. But the ship will go on. It will attack and attack, and

ultimately will destroy Gith.

“And if Gith should die and be born again and evolve a new race, and if that race shall reach a stage of culture approaching that of its cursed forebears, the ship will attack again until it has destroyed them. It will attack all the more powerfully for having rested, for between attacks it will circle Sykor, drinking and storing its energy.

‘Perhaps there will come a time when Sykor will cool, or flare up and explode, or become subject to the influence of a wandering star. Perhaps then the ship will cease to be, but it is possible that it will go wandering off into the dark, never to be active again. But if it should wander into a similar system to that which bore it, then it will bring death and horror to that system’s inhabitants. If this should be, it will be unjust; but it will be only an extension of the illimitable evil of Gith.’ “

Belter raised his head. “That is what we were up against. What passed in that Jovian’s mind when we burst in on it, with our quarreling and our blasters and our death-dealing, I can only imagine. It made no move to harm us, though it was armed. I think that it may have been leaving us to the same inevitable end which overcame Gith. Apparently a Jovian is capable of thinking beyond immediate advantage.

“I have one more thing to tell you. According to star photographs found in a huge file on the Invader, and the tests and examinations I mentioned, the Invader is slightly over fourteen million years old.

“There is a defense against The Death. You can’t kill a dead man. Now, in more ways than one, I give you over to Hereford.”

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